



Stanford eCorner

A Problem of More and Less

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Stanford Professor Bob Sutton, co-author of *Scaling Up Excellence*, talks about the things growing organizations continue to do long after they have lost their usefulness, from unnecessary reports to all-hands meetings bursting at the seams.



Transcript

The second thing and something that Huggy and I have written a lot about is sometimes we call scaling the problem of more because when you're scaling like you got something good, you're spreading it to more places to more people you're trying to grow Pulse, you're trying to open more McDonald's or more In-N-Out Burger's, but the other thing that we emphasize is scaling is actually a problem of less as well because there are a whole bunch of things that well maybe used to work and don't work any more and you got rid of them and there also might be things you've always done that actually slow you down you don't realize it. So to give you a few illustrations I did not think I would live long enough to see the President of the United States fire the CEO of General Motors, but I did live that long and when Obama fired the CEO of General Motors he brought in a guy named Ed Whitacre who was CEO of AT&T and this is the video is on, but it doesn't matter, as a tax payer, I've given enough money to General Motors I can say this. So there were a group of us in our department who worked with the General Motors R&D organization for about seven or eight years. At any time we came up with an idea of how to try to make things better. They had what we call the no we can't mindset and the reason was almost always because that's a good idea, but it's too difficult to do because and one of the reasons was they always had to write reports and I was pleased to see that Ed Whitacre, is he sort of made this little change going from 94 to 4 required reports. We actually - are going to have some General Motors senior executives here next week who Huggy and I are going to meet with and I'm going to be really curious to see what happens because my goal is to give them as much grief as possible and see if they're making any progress anyway, an organization I have a long standing both love and hate for. An organization I have only long-standing love for is IDEO and IDEO I have known for a long time in the mid-90s, one of my former doctoral students Andy Hargadon and I did a 15 month, 16 month ethnography there. We really hung out a long time and in those days they had about 60 people and the guy in the middle with the moustache that's David Kelly, that's what he used to look like. He has always been bald unlike me and in some of my earlier talks I am actually not bald in this seminar. But in those days there would be about 60 people in Palo Alto at the Monday morning meeting and David was absolutely masterful.

He'd start out with a joke or a story, the thing that he usually started out in those days, he wasn't married, he'd usually talk about the bad date he had over the weekend, so that sort of warmed everybody up. And then he'd go around the room and he'd get just about everybody to talk or he would say something about you. So we were the ethnographers and he would say they're watching you, they're writing down everything you say, we've got spies and which actually we were writing down everything they said to the extent we could and one of the things that we wrote down was that almost everybody would talk and participate, because we'd - record comments and count and stuff. Then IDEO grew to about 150 people and I remember going to this Monday morning meeting sort of towards the end, it was absolute hell. It just did not work, they reached the scale where what got them there won't get them the next level.